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ABSTRACT

Speech writing can be an excellent vehicle for helping students develop writing skills. The course described in this paper blends rhetorical principles and practices from public speaking, speech composition, persuasion and public relations with "real world applications." Students work on developing purposeful communication, a consistent and appropriate voice, and a workable system of topic analysis. Writing for clarity is emphasized, through work on grammar and punctuation, logic, organization, and some of the rhetorical devices for promoting clarity and retention. Style is always the most difficult professional canon to teach in performance classes. Emotional impact can be heightened by means of discussion of word choice and by checking for mistakes of commission and omission. The speech writing teacher can promote applied rhetorical criticism by making students editors and critics of each other's work. As effective public discourse is a constant in an inconstant world, the speech writing course can help develop better creators and consumers of public discourse. (Fourteen references are attached.) (SG)

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# *DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS IN A SPEECH WRITING COURSE*

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Since the publication of Nation at Risk in 1983 critics of higher education have been having a field day. Alan Bloom complained in The Closing of the American Mind that "The university's evident lack of wholeness in an enterprise that clearly demands it cannot help troubling some of its members." (380) The Chronicle of Higher Education said that Charles Sykes The Hollow Men: Politics and Corruption in Higher Education " chronicles what he says is a fragmentation of the curriculum, politicization of scholarship and the classroom, and an intolerance for free speech on campuses." (A2) In addition to charges that the curriculum lacks coherence, American education is also accused of not teaching the basics of liberal education (Cheney, 11) or providing cultural literacy, (Hirsch). The Kinsey Foundation people have even discovered that we are not privy to accurate sexual information. But of all the problems which people identify and complain about, the need for stronger writing skills has a secure first place. That is a consistent dirge in spite of the findings of the Association of English Department's findings that "within the last 10 years, writing instruction in colleges and universities has expanded in both variety and size." (Thompson, 32). I do agree with my colleagues in English departments that the responsibility for teaching writing lies on all of us and not exclusively with them.

Would that I had an answer for all of those woes presented by the critics. I do not, but I have found that the course in Speech Writing does allows me to address oral and written communication theories and applications in a more coherent way and one which permits connections between the class, other courses, and the "real world." Today I would like to describe for you the way in which a course in Speech Writing can work particularly well in helping students develop their written communication skills.

Before getting to the specific ways in which I have found Speech Writing to be an excellent vehicle for helping the students develop their writing skills, I would like to provide some philosophical background relating this paper to the theme of the convention. As we search for constancy in this inconstant world, there are some verities to which we can cling in addition to death, taxes, and criticisms of education. First of all, instruction in communication fits comfortably within the liberal arts and also in the preparation of a productive citizen. What we do is highly significant. When I start feeling depressed in reading the many criticisms of higher education I like to return to the arguments which the outstanding Athenian speech teacher, Isocrates used in his defense of his life's work when he described rhetoric as "the source of most of our blessings" and went on to say:

> but, because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped up establish. (327)

Bruce Grombeck in Communication Education agreed, "Ultimately, Isocrates was right. Rhetorical training is education for life. Social relations are constructed, regulated, and changed through public discourse. Public meaning-

making and society making are but identical processes (189). From a non pedagogical perspective, Peggy Noonan, the by now famous speech writer for President Reagan and for a short time, President Bush, described the importance of public speeches

> Speeches are not significant because we have the technological ability to make them heard by every member of our hugh nation simultaneously. Speeches are important because they are one of the great constants of our political history. (60)

The question now gets more specific. Assuming that you agree that teachers of communication have the responsibility of working with the students on the most important aspect of their education, how best might we do this?

I feel as if I appear before you in a blackened condition--not like the Cajun redfish, nor like the mad dog or Englishman baked in the noonday sun, not even from my sins, but from the feeling that I am busy carrying coals to Newcastle. I hope that you will find some ideas in the following discussion that will assist you in your own teaching.

The Speech Writing course blends together rhetorical principles and practices from public speaking, speech composition, persuasion, and public relations with "real world applications." The students are asked to be both creators and critics. Since their speeches are written with the possibility of presentation by their client, they must be socially and ethically responsible. This allows the instructor to make connections among theory, usage, and professional work not possible in courses dealing with only one aspect of public communication. The Speech Writing Course was particularly helpful in working with the students writing.

## DEVELOPING PURPOSEFUL COMMUNICATION

As a teacher of public speaking, I often had difficulty in teaching my students how to think through the process of determining what their specific purpose would be. Since Speech Writing allows working with the speech from outline stage through several drafts, the instructor can keep working for a clear statement of purpose. I like to have my students state their purpose in terms of the reaction they want as a result of the audience's having heard the speech, ie. "I want the Board of Regents to ...." This also gives the instructor ample opportunities to clarify the differences among the general purposes and discuss what strategies are most appropriate for the different kinds of speeches.

## DEVELOPING CONSISTENT AND APPROPRIATE VOICE

Students in Speech Writing not only have frequent feedback on the consistency of voice for each of their speeches, they also receive comments about the appropriateness of the voice for the speech maker. As they work in groups or serve as editor for one of their colleagues in the class, they must make judgments about whether wording and syntax are right for whoever will present the speech--whether he or she be a politician, a businessperson, a college administrator, a public relations practitioner or whatever field they are in.

*They learn to think of nuances that might signal regionalism, educational level, socio-economic status.*

## *DEVELOPING A WORKABLE SYSTEM OF TOPIC ANALYSIS*

*As I teach the course, all of the students work on the same speech for several weeks. That allows time for analysis and invention. As Richard McKeon wrote:*

> *The new art of rhetoric is the art of discovery. It is not a heuristic method or radical interpretation but an art of topics or a selection of elements which opens the way to the recognition of new facts and to the perception of unnoticed structures and sequences. (110)*

*Class discussion followed by stages of speech development promotes sharing of information and insights. At the same time, the students know that the entire class will be working on the same speech so they are challenged to think of some creative approach to set themselves apart from the pack.*

## *WRITING FOR CLARITY*

*1. GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION Many of my students have had little drill in punctuation and grammar for years. The Speech writing course is taught as a professional class in which mistakes have a high penalty. Since most of the students taking the class are Public Relations majors, they must be made aware of the importance of accuracy whether it be in the content or in grammar or punctuation. Since oral style is typically less formal than written, the students can deviate from normal usage if they can explain why they are doing it. If they can't, then they pay with lost points. I work especially hard to have them see grammar and punctuation as logical helps for the reader. Richard McKeon explained it this way:*

> *The new grammar or art of interpretation or hermeneutics is the art of interpreting objective evidence, that is, of interpreting what is the case as what is the case...The new grammar is the art of recovery. It is not an art of topics or a selection of elements, but an art of hypotheses or an interpretation of situations and facts. (112)*

*2. LOGIC Students have ample opportunities to ask each other, "What do you mean by this?" They have the practical experience of trying to associate their information with schema in the minds of the particular audience. Besides the principle that people learn by association, they also have experience in recognizing that the material has to make sense to the hearer. The interpretation and reasoning need to be understandable to the audience. McKeon also considered this aspect of rhetoric as he defined*

> *The new logic or analytic or art of method is the art of relating, that is , of relating occurrences and reactions in accounts which induce sensitive awareness and consequential judgment. Accounts of sequences and consequences examine and recount recurrent themes in specific or singular variations. (115)*

The need to teach critical thinking is being shouted from the housetops. The Speech Writing works well for identifying the critical thinking process being used and to check for flaws in reasoning.

3. ORGANIZATION In addition to the enablers of correct grammar,punctuation, and logic, Speech Writing permits more attention to the rhetorical principles making for clarity. As the instructor and the students work on the speech from outline through polished stages, they can evaluate the parts of the speech in terms of how effectively each part meets the traditional functions of that part, ie did the Introduction effectively capture the audience's attention and provide effective psychological and logical orientations? Were the individual points appropriately developed?

4. RHETORICAL DEVICES OF CLARITY AND RETENTION More particularly, the students work on developing the rhetorical devices which help the audience understand. They learn that they must think in terms of relating the information to the schema of the audience. They experiment with various ways of providing pre-internal-post summaries, transitions, and signposts. They learn about emphasis via word choice, repetition, quantity of content, and "now hear this" labels as ways to help the audience remember the significant material. Visual aids are also discussed as ways of increasing understanding. There are very high probabilities that audio-visual aids would be used by speech makers who have speech writers.

## WRITING FOR EMOTIONAL IMPACT

Style was always the most frustrating canon to teach in performance classes. The word choice wafts by on the air, equally transitory whether it be pleasantly fragrant or fetid. Having the words on paper makes a marvelous difference. The students and instructors can actually consider connotations of words and discuss various alternatives. The students do some exercises to encourage their experimenting with figures of speech. The instructor has the opportunity to wage battle against some of the stale sayings written while the students were burning the midnight oil, waiting for inspiration to strike. For heaven's sake, of course I wrote that on purpose.

Unfortunate though many of us consider it, the 30 second sound bite is a reality so special attention is given to writing for the media. The students work to create some memorable statement to be quoted. The class especially focuses on the uses of metaphors and antithesis.

The reading aloud of sample speeches encourages their developing a sense of rhythm--of hearing the sound as they write.

Students also check for mistakes of commission and omission. Did they use language which might be offensive to some segment of the audience on racist, sexist, religious or other grounds? Did they, through their use of language, suggest that part of the audience was not included or less significant? For example, when writing to college audiences, did they word the speech in such a way that the non-traditional students were not included? In writing a speech

*of welcome for freshman orientation which includes the families of the incoming students, did they mention only parents and not spouses and children?*

## *BECOMING AN EDITOR/CRITIC*

*James Andrews did a masterful job of describing what the Speech Writing teacher hopes to accomplish through assignments of applied rhetorical criticism, ie, serving as the editor/critic for a fellow classmate:*

> *So, the first objective of a course in rhetorical criticism is to develop a student's critical perspective* from which he or she may view rhetorical discourse, a perspective that directs attention toward the purposes of criticism: to illuminate discourse by understanding how it works, and to evaluate discourse by judging its functional and social merit. (179)

Bruce Grombeck contended that rhetorical criticism should be taught not only as an advanced course, but also as part of "our foundational curriculum." (188) Speech Writing is not part of the traditional curriculum, but working with practicing rhetorical criticism certainly works well as an integral part of the Speech Writing course. Martin Medhurst further supported the benefits of written rhetorical criticism when he wrote:

> I therefore take the following as my beginning assumptions: that one of the central goals of teaching rhetorical criticism to undergraduates is the development of facility in written argument; that rhetorical criticism is a specialized form of "forensic reasoning" (Rosenfield, 1968); and that criticism proceeds by means of formulating, structuring, and sustaining a "significant argument" (Brockriede, 1974) about the artifact under study. If such facility in written argument is an important goal, then one must develop pedagogical strategies for attaining the goal, for transporting the student from a state of analytical innocence to one of communicative competence in the written mode. (206)

From the practical rhetorical criticism that they do as editors of their own and other's speeches, one certainly hopes that they will emerge as more sensitive to rhetorical options. Sonja Foss put it well when she said, "In short, the students should become discriminating consumers of symbols, ready to question and investigate the rhetorical phenomena around them." (191)

A very prosaic but important part of the editing/criticizing process is the students'realizing the importance of revision. Painful though it be, students eventually can see the sense from reports by professional speechwriters like Charles Parnell saying, "I believe that in good writing, the three principles are revise, revise, and revise," (210) or former Iacocca speechwriter Michael Morrison being reported as doing 15-20 drafts of a major speech. (Byrne, 116)

## CONCLUSION

In summary, I would strongly recommend a Speech Writing course as a method of making those connections which the critics of higher education complain about. I would urge that it be considered in the mainstream of the liberal arts

tradition with a firm aim of developing an effectively functioning citizen-rhetor. The course allows the instructor and the students to work on a number of special problems that often are not addressed in the same course. In particular, the instructor and the students can work on their written communication skills to develop a purposeful speech written clearly and forcefully, in a consistent and appropriate voice. Speech Writing also encourages the students' developing stronger critical skills making them both a more intelligent consumer of communication and a more effective co-worker in teams working on communication projects.

The importance of effective public discourse is a constant in this inconstant world. The Speech Writing course helps develop better creators and consumers of public discourse.

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